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THE STORY OF THE PUBLICATION OF IBSEN'S *BRAND*

One of the most interesting problems in the external history of Ibsen's plays is the long delay in the publication of *Brand*. The reason hitherto assigned by editors of Ibsen, and to my knowledge passed on as a commonplace by scholars, is not convincing. And it is not difficult to show that it is wrong.

Bjørnson had put Ibsen in touch with the house of Gyldendal in the summer of 1865, and Hegel had agreed to publish a new dramatic poem by Ibsen, which, however, had still to be written. After various futile efforts to shape his material into an epic, Ibsen turned again to the drama and thereafter progress was rapid. On September 12, 1865, he writes to Bjørnson that Act IV of *Brand* is finished and that he feels that he can get the fifth act out of the way within a week: "I work both forenoon and afternoon, something I have never before been able to do."<sup>1</sup> Hegel acknowledged the receipt of one-third of the manuscript on November 7.

"I had the honor yesterday to receive the manuscript of the first third of *Brand*, which was sent from Rome on October 25, and must accordingly have been delayed on the way. I presume that it is your wish to have the poem published in time for the Christmas season (til Julen). It should therefore be printed and in the book stalls not later than the beginning of December, in order that it may reach Norway in time. I will do everything in my power to make this possible and I hope that it will be, if I receive your manuscript by the time you have promised it—the middle of November."<sup>2</sup>

But *Brand* did not appear in time for the Christmas book season of 1865. It did not appear till the following March. The accepted explanation of the long delay is that Hegel was so doubtful about the success of *Brand* that he hesitated to send it out. Thus Herford, in his introduction to the play in the *Collected Works*, vividly states the case: "The publisher, Hegel—to whom Ibsen

<sup>1</sup> *Breve fra Henrik Ibsen*. II, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> L. C. Nielsen: *Fredrik V. Hegel, Breve til og fra ham. Et Mindeskrift* København, 1909, p. 573.

had been introduced by Bjørnson—was somewhat sceptical of the success of a verse drama so unusual in style, so long, and so fiercely abusive of those to whom it was addressed.” And the editors of Ibsen’s *Posthumous Works* tell us in so many words: “Hegel had no real confidence in its success with the public, and publication was delayed in consequence till March 15, 1866.”<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to rest content with this. If Hegel had accepted *Brand*, why should he postpone publication? Surely it was bad business to let December go by—the season of seasons for book-buying in Northern Europe—and publish the poem in a dead season. If it was to have any success at all, one might *a priori* suppose that it would command more general attention at the Christmas season than at any other time, and if it was to fail, it would certainly fail more dismally when book-buyers were no longer in the rush of the season. As a matter of fact, L. C. Nielsen, Hegel’s biographer, as far back as 1909, furnished the materials for, and pointed to, the true explanation of the hitherto inexplicable, and to Ibsen, inexpressibly trying delay in the publication of *Brand*. And the explanation is almost ludicrously simple.

It is true that Hegel had doubts about *Brand*, but not about publishing it, or the wisdom of getting it out in time for Christmas. On November 23 he wrote Ibsen a most interesting and revelatory letter, of which the following is the material portion:

“When I wrote to you on November 7, I had just received one-third of the manuscript of your new dramatic poem, which I sent immediately to the printer. I supposed then that it was the work about which Hr. Bjørnson told me last summer, and which dealt with an historical subject from the remote past. But I find now in reading the proof sheets that the poem is something quite different, and although I have received and read only about two-thirds of the whole, I have come to feel, nevertheless, from this, that the work despite all its beauties might possibly not be understood by the mass, and that the sale might not be so great as to warrant an edition of 1,250 copies. I hasten therefore to inform you that I propose to publish half the number of copies,

<sup>3</sup>Henrik Ibsen: *Efterladte Skrifter*. Udgivne af Halvdan Koht og Julius Elias. København og Kristiania, 1909, III, 402.

for which I will pay 15 Rigsdaler the signature. By this arrangement you will lose nothing in the event that the book gains the hoped for success, and I do not run the risk of printing twice the number of copies that *may* be necessary. The very language—differing as it does from our own and containing a great number of strange words, the meaning of which we must guess at—will prevent many here in Denmark from reading your book. This, however, I regard as a secondary matter; primarily I am doubtful about the contents. From the bottom of my heart I hope for your sake that my fears may prove unfounded.”<sup>4</sup>

But no answer came from Ibsen, and on December 7 Hegel wrote again:

“Since Saturday I have waited in vain for an answer from you to my letter of the 23 ultimo. By dint of the greatest efforts on the parts of the printery, your book, in accordance with my request, was ready to go to press on Saturday. But inasmuch as my proposition of November 7 as to the size of the edition was made under a misapprehension, and I have altered it in my latest communication, I cannot give orders for the final printing until your answer is at hand.”<sup>5</sup>

No answer came from Ibsen, either to the letter of November 23 or to that of December 7. Hegel was irritated, perhaps as much as Ibsen at his end of the long and uncertain line of communication. To Bjørnson, on February 18, 1866, he wrote:

“I cannot understand Henrik Ibsen. You know how the case stands, for I wrote you last about it. Since I had no confidence that his book would succeed with the great public, I wished to make a trial by publishing half of the proposed edition, let the forms stand, and publish the rest if it was needed. I wrote, of course, with the greatest caution and courtesy, first on November 23, then, in form of a reminder, on December 7, informing him at the same time that the book was fully set up and corrected. But he has not deigned to answer. I should feel sorry if I had

<sup>4</sup>L. C. Nielsen: *Fredrik V. Hegel. Hans Forøgængere og hans Slægt*. København, 1909, pp. 217-218.

<sup>5</sup>Nielsen: *Fredrik Hegel. Breve til og fra ham*, p. 573.

quite unintentionally given him cause for offense; I would much rather bear the possible loss."<sup>6</sup>

Finally Hegel in desperation ordered the book struck off. Writing to Bjørnson again on March 7, he says:

"It is strange that Hr. Ibsen has failed to answer me with as much as a word. But now we are already in March and I dare not with a good conscience let his book lie any longer. I shall publish it in about a week (Jeg lader den nu i Guds Navn gaa ud om en 8 Dage), and shall print in accordance with the stipulations about which we at once agreed."<sup>7</sup>

On the very day that Hegel wrote the letter from which I have quoted above Ibsen cleared up the mystery of what had seemed his inexplicable silence. He wrote to his publisher from Rome:

"After I had under date of December 2 of last year agreed to your plan of printing a reduced edition of my book and to the settlement of the royalty on a basis proportionate thereto, I received from you a letter dated December 7 in which you inform me that the book can not be got ready for Christmas publication. To this communication no answer was necessary, inasmuch as I had already expressly authorized you in the above mentioned letter to act in my behalf as you deemed best, for I was convinced then, as I am now, that you would act in accordance with my interests (vide at ramme mit Tarv)."<sup>8</sup>

The letter to which Ibsen here refers, *Hegel never received*. That such a letter had gone from Rome Ibsen earnestly assures his publisher in a long letter of March 16 in answer to Hegel's of March 7:

"Your letter of November 23 was answered by me on the very day of its receipt, namely, Saturday, December 2. Since I make no first draft of my letters, and since I keep no letter book, merely recording the date on which they are sent, I cannot, of course, repeat the letter verbatim, but the substance of it was that I agreed to your plan of reducing the edition and the royalty; further, that, to avoid delay in publication by a continued correspondence

<sup>6</sup> Nielsen: Fredrik Hegel. *Hans Forgængere og hans Slægt*, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>8</sup> Nielsen: *Fredrik Hegel. Breve til og fra ham*, pp. 293-294.

back and forth, I gave you authority to decide without consulting me all questions which might arise in connection with this matter, adding that I felt convinced that you would on your own volition guard my interests as well as I could myself. . . .

"That a letter to this effect under the above mentioned date was written and posted by me, I hereby affirm on my honor and conscience; and if you have not received it, it must have gone stray on the way. But this possibility I had not until now taken into account, and this is the reason that I did not answer your letter of December 14(?)—for what required an answer therein had already been answered in the lost letter, which, as I supposed, had merely been delayed and had reached you a few days later."<sup>9</sup>

Ibsen goes on to tell of his own doubts and uncertainties in all this suspense, but this is well known and hardly concerns us here. The point is, as Nielsen indicated nearly a decade ago in his note to Ibsen's letter of March 7—strangely overlooked hitherto by scholars—that Hegel's delay in putting *Brand* on the market was not due to his uncertainty about its reception, though, as we have seen, he did have some uncertainty, but to a pure chance—the loss in the mails of Ibsen's letter of December 2, 1865.

MARTIN B. RUUD.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 294-295.